DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 459 TM 035 386

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TITLE	Factors that Promote and Inhibit the Academic Achievement of Rural Elementary African American Males in a Mississippi School: A Qualitative Study.
PUB DATE	2003-11-00
NOTE	24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Biloxi, MS, November 5-7, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Black Students; Environmental Influences; *Family Influence; *Males; *Performance Factors; Qualitative Research; Rural Youth
IDENTIFIERS	Mississippi

ABSTRACT

This study investigated factors that promote and inhibit the academic success of elementary African American males in grades 3 through 6 in a rural school in Mississippi. The qualitative study analyzed interview data gathered in 6 face-to-face interviews with 16 African American males over a 3-month period in the 2002-2003 academic year. All students were regular education students between 8 and 13 years old. The interviews focused on home and school experiences and how these two environments affected their academic success. Findings reveal that academic assistance and parental involvement were primary factors supporting and promoting their academic success. In addition, classroom distractions, study habits, problems at school, and school safety concerns were inhibitors of their academic success. Among students who did not perform well academically, early literacy activities had not been a substantial part of their preschool experiences. Recommendations growing from the study included a similar study with African American males from different parts of the United States and a replication with African American girls to compare their responses to see if they have the same viewpoints related to academic success and failure. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Factors that Promote and Inhibit the Academic Achievement of Rural Elementary African American Males in a Mississippi School a Qualitative Study

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TM035386

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association
Biloxi, MS - November 2003

ABSTRACT

This study investigated factors that promote and inhibit the academic success of elementary African American males in grades 3 through 6 in a rural school in Mississippi. The qualitative study analyzed interview data gathered in 6 face-to-face interviews with 16 African-American males over a 3-month period during the 2002-2003 academic school year. All students were regular education students between 8 and 13 years old. The interviews focused on home and school experiences and how these two environments affected their academic success.

Findings revealed that academic assistance and parental involvement were primary factors supporting and promoting their academic success. In addition, classroom distractions, study habits, problems at school, and school safety concerns were inhibitors to their academic success. Among students who did not perform well academically, early literacy activities had not been a substantial part of their preschool experiences. Recommendations growing from the study included a similar study with African American males from different parts of the United States and to replicate this study with African American girls and compare their responses to determine if both groups had the same viewpoints related to academic success and failure.

Public educational institutions in the United States have been charged with the responsibility of leaving no child behind (U. S. Department of Education). The No Child Left Behind Act (2001), introduced on May 23, 2001, encompasses policies and programs geared toward improving the quality of life for American children. Achieving the goal of leaving no child behind requires that teachers and administrators become highly qualified and engage a diverse student population in meaningful learning experiences (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). According to this new requirement, educators must ensure that all students, including disadvantaged and minority students, meet the same high academic standards as others.

A large number of elementary school African American males experience a drastic decline in their academic growth after entering the third grade. Although, they have the potential for success, this population is not achieving as well as others. There is limited research addressing this educational concern, therefore, giving insight to this phenomena is important. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover the major factors that promote and inhibit their academic success in a rural elementary school in Mississippi. This research will provide school administrators and others with an insight to the major factors that influence academic change in elementary African American males in a rural school in Mississippi. Findings may also be useful to school administrators and teacher preparation programs so that they may better prepare educators who will work in rural schools. Additionally, the results may expand the knowledge base for educators and other stakeholders who seek to meet the needs of this group of students.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What factors promote academic success in elementary African American males in a rural school in Mississippi?
2. What factors inhibit academic success in elementary African American males in a rural school in Mississippi?

It was assumed that all students would respond to all inquiries honestly and to the best of their abilities, and that interview questions would be free of bias. It was assumed that no parts of the research would cause mental or bodily harm to the students and that any interviewer bias would be acknowledged during data interpretation. This study was limited to African American males who attended a rural elementary school in Mississippi during the 2002-2003 school year. Therefore, the results are not a reflection of the attitudes of all elementary African American males. Due to the large number of potential students in this population, a purposive group was used and was selected from among students enrolled in a rural school.

Since the 1960s, special efforts have been initiated to help at-risk minority children improve their school performance. During this era, social theorists and scientists assumed that the school performance of minority children depended on three factors, (a) home environment, (b) school environment and (c) genetic endowment (Bloom, Davis, & Hess 1965; Coleman 1966; Jensen 1969; Guthrie, Kleindorfer, Levin, & Stout 1971, as cited by Osborne, 1999). Therefore, it appeared that African American children were unsuccessful in school

because their home or school environments or their genetic endowments were determinates of substandard academic success (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Often theorists attempted to explain why, despite all efforts, minority children, especially African American males, continue not to achieve academically in comparison to their majority counterparts (Osborne, 1999). Osborne's study analyzed, compared and contrasted three theories that were related to the academic achievement of African American males. The three theories were: (a) Steele's (1997) stereotype threat theory, (b) Ogbu's (1998) cultural-ecological perspective and (c) Majors and Billson's (1992) "cool pose" theory.

Based on Osborne's (1999) analysis of these theories, African American males appeared to be at risk for academic failure. This was due to a lack of (a) self-esteem, self-worth, and identification with academic success coupled with a fear of failure that resulted in behavior problems, high-grade retention rates and school dropout (Osborne, 1999). Social scientists have continued to argue about the influence that home and school environments have on academic achievement. In more recent years, cultural differences have been linked with the disproportionately high rate of school failure among African American children, especially males (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Using cross-cultural data, their study explored the influences of culture on the cognitive skills or intelligence of minorities.

According to their cultural-ecological theory, most oppressed groups have rejected academic achievement in order to avoid accepting the values of the majority culture. Ogbu and Simons' cultural-ecological theory focused on the differences in school achievement of voluntary and involuntary minorities. Voluntary minorities are immigrants who came to the United States seeking a better life and involuntary minorities are immigrants who came to the United States without choice. The theory defined mistrust and peer pressure as issues related to school failure of many involuntary minority students.

Steele's stereotype threat model argues that socio-cultural factors negatively influence students of color ability to become or remain interested in academics (Steele, 1992, 1997). According to this theory, negative stereotypes associated with race cause students of color to under achieve academically and to disassociate with academics, because of fear of predicted failure. Although, all students experience some form of anxiety in school, students from minority groups associated with negative group stereotypes concerning academic abilities, suffer from additional anxiety. This causes students of color to withdraw rather than attempt to attain academic success. This lack of effort results in placement in special remediation classes, which further reinforce their frustration and unwillingness to try (Steele 1997).

According to research, lack of identification with academics have been shown to cause or influence poor academic performance among African American males. Osborne's research affirmed that students who valued academics or identified with academics had (a) predictive academic success, (b) higher grades, (c) fewer behavioral referrals, and (d) lower absenteeism (Osborne, 1997; Osborne & Rausch, 2001). The results from these studies revealed that psychological variables could be linked to academic achievement, these variables included, (a) learning goals, (b) intrinsic valuing of academics, (c) self-regulation, (d) mastery orientation,

(e) academic competitiveness, and (f) cognitive processing of course material (Osborne & Rausch, 2001). Findings confirmed that students' identification with academics was related to academic outcomes, probably through variables such as motivation and persistence, among others.

Steele and Aronson (1995) conducted an experiment with African American and White students using test results that revealed that African American students under performed when they believed testing was measuring intellectual abilities rather than achievement or knowledge. However, performance was equal to that of White students when they believed testing was non-diagnostic. In further study, Steele found that African American students under-performed on tests when asked to indicate their racial background as a part of the test documentation, but performed equal to other groups, when racial background was not required. Negative stereotypes about one's group, according to Steele, depressed the standardized test performance of minority students. This research further confirmed that when this threat occurred during the administration of a high stake standardized test, it directly interfered with test performance (Steele, 1995). However, Steele pointed out that the gap in academic achievement and test scores could be a result of lack of preparation and identification with school achievement.

Majors and Billson (1992) theorized that factors existed within society that prevented African American children from envisioning themselves as scholars, thus causing them to place little or no value on academic achievement. They depicted African American males as victims of their own coping strategies. African American males' school coping strategies often led to behavior referrals and punishment. Majors and Billson (1992) coined a term to describe this coping strategy--"cool pose". Cool pose is the ritualized approach African American males used to cope and survive in an environment of social oppression and racism, factors they described as being present in the school system. They further contended that cool pose was generally incompatible with the popular perception of appropriate student behavior, thus causing them to be viewed as behavior and discipline problems. Therefore, according to this perspective, African American males adopted a strategy for coping in a stigmatized society that often precluded academic success (Majors & Billson, 1992).

Theorists have attempted to explain the reasons why African American males tended to be low academic achievers (Steele, 1997; Ogbu, 1998; Major and Billson, (1992). These theories were associated with cultural stereotypes that have caused African American males to fear failure resulting in a lack of effort to achieve academically. However, despite the findings from these studies, some African American males did achieve with family support and encouragement to reach their fullest potentials (Wiest, 1998). Family expectations have also been linked to the academic achievement in African American male students.

Family Expectations

Many African American parents place high emphasis on educational attainment, hard work, and good moral values (Smith-Maddox, 1999). Smith-Maddox used cross-sectional data from 3,009 African American eighth graders who participated in the *National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988*. The authors of the national study collected data on the experiences of eighth graders as they made the transition from middle or junior high school to high school.

Research showed that African American students who participated in activities outside of school had higher educational aspirations (Steinberg, 1996, Smith-Maddox, 1999). Findings also confirmed that the greater the parental involvement in school-related activities, the higher was children's aspirations. Parents' level of education was not a contributing factor to students' academic achievement; however, regular communication with parents, parents' expectations and involvement were positively related (Smith-Maddox, 1999). Overall, the study found that, regardless of the socio-economical status of the family, family expectations were critical to educational aspirations of these African American eighth graders.

Bornholt and Goodnow (1999) examined the role of parental social influence on adolescents' competence at academic activities. The students for the study were 115 adolescent males and girls between the ages of 11 and 16 and their mothers and fathers. Students were asked to give their perceptions or knowledge on task difficulty and efforts needed in mathematics and English. Parental expectations and student's academic achievement were related to students' academic success. There are numerous theories about parental involvement's influence on adolescent development (Trusty. 1997: Smith-Maddox, 1999). Trusty's (1997) study of parental involvement and control over various aspects of high school seniors ' lives found these variables to be significant predictors of adolescents' locus of control. According to findings, parental involvement was significantly related to students' internal drive to be academically successful, while lack of parental involvement was significantly related to low academic achievement. The study also showed a positive relationship between parental involvement and the academic development of adolescents. Findings revealed that parental education and parental marital status were not predictive of academic achievement for African American children. However, the research found that academically successful African American males were raised in families with high levels of parental involvement and a connection with the extended family and church.

The review of literature showed the impact parental expectations and involvement had on the motivation and academic achievement of African American students. Research found that parental involvement positively influenced the academic achievement of African American students, especially males (Smith-Maddox, 1999; Bornholt & Goodnow, 1999; Trusty, 1997; Maton, at el., 1998). Of equal importance, family structure, single parent homes, extended families, or step-families were not found to be determining factors for African-American boy's academic achievement, when parents were involved in school and community activities (Maton, at.el.1998; Mandara & Murray, 2000).

Academic Achievement

The academic achievement of African American males within recent years has become a topic of interest to educators and parents throughout the United States (Steele, 1997; Osborne, 1988). Although, African American males start school with an equal potential of academic success, within three to four years in the educational system, something lessens their desire to learn and achieve academically (Kunjufu, 1988). As a result, African American males experience more (a) behavior problems, (b) grade retentions, and (c) suspensions than other students (Johnson, 1997). Therefore, the accountability of children's education is charged to individuals both inside educational institutions, as well as those outside.

African American males begin school with multiple literacy experiences derived from home and church; however, by the time they reach fourth grade they are among the lowest achievers in the school environment (Edwards & McMillion, 2000; Kunjufu, 1985). According to Kunjufu (1985) the longer African American males stayed in school the farther they tended to fall behind academically, especially if they were not stimulated or encouraged to succeed. In many school districts, by sixth grade, African American males are two grades behind in achievement and educators start observing this decline as early as fourth grade. Kunjufu (1985) randomly selected 20 African American males and analyzed their academic achievement scores from third to eighth grade. Results showed that (a) 14 males' test scores decreased over the 5-year period, (b) 4 males' test scores improved and (c) 2 males' test scores showed no significant change. The findings from this study showed that the decline in test scores and lack of academic motivation of African American males started as early as fourth grade. Kunjufu referred to this as "Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome", where, at-risk factors increase and African American males begin losing an interest in education.

Due to the low academic achievement of African American males, programs have been implemented across the country, in an attempt, to close the academic gap. In response to research suggesting that African-American males began to slide academically at some point between the third or fourth grade, program organizers suggested enrichment classes that accommodated the social and academic needs of African American males, (Kunjufu, 1985). Kunjufu contended those African American males' grades, test scores, and attitudes about education started to become negative after the third grade due to a lack of motivation from the community and education system. Kunjufu further challenged that African American males needed more community involvement and male role models to ensure academic success.

The academic achievement of African American students in the United States has been a social and policy concern as the numbers of minority children in schools have increased while their academic performance has decreased. Since little is known about the academic changes that occurred within this population, a qualitative approach was used to discover the factors that promote or inhibit academic achievement of African American males in grades three through six in a rural school district in the South. As noted by Creswell (1994) qualitative research focuses on the meaning that people make of their lives, their experiences, and their environment. Through the identification of this meaning to young African American males, insights into the structure and culture of their academic experiences may provide options for change by those who educate them.

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative model was selected because according to Strauss and Corbin (1998) this approach provides the researcher with a sense of vision through the words and actions of the study students. This approach further brings critical ideas into reality and allows for grounded theory. The qualitative methodology allows focus on the students' life, behavior, emotions, and feelings. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the personal experiences and the meaning of those experiences of elementary African American males, personal interviews were used as the major data gathering technique. Particular emphasis was

placed upon the factors influencing academic achievement of African American males in grades three through six in a rural elementary school in Mississippi.

Description of Students

All students were enrolled in a small rural elementary school in Mississippi. The school district serves a large geographic area that contains both rural and suburban communities, as well as several small communities that have been transformed from rural to suburban towns beginning in the early 1980's. The school district is one of the largest districts in the state. The district serves grades pre-kindergarten through 12 and enrolls over 15,000 students. The district test scores rank among the top 15% in the state. The district student population is 78% White and 21% African American, 51% male and 49% percent female.

The school is located in a rural community that serves students in its attendance area. In 2001-2002 the student enrollment was 370 students with a racial composition of 75% White and 25% African American.. Approximately 50% of the students who attend this rural school through sixth grade do not graduate from high school. The school faculty consists of 19 certified teachers, one full-time counselor and an administrator and serves low socio-economic income families. The school attendance area has a high unemployment rate. The average student-teacher ratio is 20 to 1. The school receives Title 1 funding; therefore, this school is identified as a low socio-economic school community.

The school enrollment for African American males in grades 3 through 6 is 31. However, 6 students were not included in the study due to previously being ruled eligible for special services for children with learning disabilities, primarily in reading and math. Therefore, 25 African American males were invited to participate in the research project and 16 agreed to participate. The students included four third graders, seven fourth graders, three fifth graders and two sixth graders. They ranged in age from 8 to 13. Three males were 8 years old, 3 were 9 years old, 5 were 10 years old, 3 were 11 years old and 2 were 13 years old. Seven of the students have repeated a grade, among these students1 was retained in first grade, 2 repeated second grade, 3 repeated third grade and 1 was a multiple repeater, repeating grades one and five. Nine students have never repeated a grade. None of the 16 students repeated kindergarten.

Data Collection Procedures

Two approaches were used to collect data. The first was face-to-face interviews with students. The second was an examination of each student's academic progress contained in the school's cumulative records. Data were collected using face-to-face interviews individually with each of the 16 elementary African American males. The interviews were conducted in their educational setting during the 2002-2003 academic school year.

Students were interviewed over a 3-month period on 6 separate occasions for approximately 30-minutes each. Students were asked to describe their feelings about school, teachers, parents and themselves. In order to capture the full essence of the interviews, the sessions were tape-recorded. Students were probed for clarification of responses to gain better insight to their inner feelings. According to Holstein and Gubrium (1995) the researcher should encourage the respondent to further explain an answer and elaborate on why the answer or

question makes sense. Therefore, the active interview did not consist of just simple dialogue between individuals, but focused on the gathering of information for constructing knowledge. Additional questions were asked to obtain clarity of responses.

In order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of student's daily experiences students' academic records were examined. Academic records examined included the Mississippi Curriculum Test Scores (MCT) and 2002-2003 first semester grades. Data gathered from interviews and school records were examined to capture a true picture of the students.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol designed to obtain rich data from students was developed. It consisted of open-ended questions and was divided into six sections each of which contained appropriate open-ended questions that concentrated on a specific topic. A curriculum expert in the field of education agreed to validate interview items. The curriculum expert has over 20 years of administrative and curriculum experience and has been instrumental in the modification of curricula for schools within the state of Mississippi. Only items that were validated by the curriculum expert were included on the interview protocol. The interview protocol topics focused on (a) Home and Parents, (b) School, (c) Academics, and (d) Learning Environment.

Analysis of Data

The taped-recorded interview responses were transcribed into textual data. The textual data was coded into reoccurring themes and provided the basis for generating grounded theory. Responses were analyzed across interviews for similarities and differences among students. Data were sorted into meaningful codes and organized according to patterns and common themes across students.

Results of Study

This qualitative study involving 16 elementary African American males provides insight into their educational experiences, particularly into their perspectives concerning academic achievement. The students shared viewpoints and feelings about their daily experience in a rural Mississippi school. This study was in three thoughts related to this educational concern. First, a limited amount of research exists addressing academic achievement in elementary African American males. Second, African American males are faced daily with situations that appear to decrease their chances for academic achievement. Third, a limited amount of research identifying factors that either promote or inhibit academic achievement in elementary African American males was found. Therefore, this study offered an opportunity to gain a better understanding and insight into the factors that influence their academic success.

Mississippi Curriculum Test Scores. The Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT) is aligned with the *Mississippi Curriculum Frameworks*, which define what students are expected to know and be able to do. The test is designed to measure student performance in grades two through eight in the academic disciplines of reading, language, and mathematics. The school administered the MCT to approximately 240 students in grades 2 through 6 during the first week of May 2002. A student's performance score on the MCT indicates one of four possible levels in each academic area. The proficiency levels from lowest performance to highest performance are Minimal, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. Fifteen students were administered the MCT.

One student was absent on the day the reading test was administered. Most of the students scored proficient in reading and proficient and advance in math on the MCT.

2002-2003 First Semester Grade Average. All 16 student's first semester grades in reading and math were observed to determine their academic status. The first semester term was from August 2002 through December 2002. The majority of the students earned an average grade of C in reading and math. Most of the 16 students had current grades of C's in Reading and B's and C's in math. The potential of retention in their current grade level exists for three of these students. Two of these students have been retained previously. The majority of students failed grade three and the potential for failure is greater for this grade the 2002-2003 school year. The retention rate for the 16 students is relatively high and with the potential of possible failure in the current grade, could place the group's retention rate at almost 50%.

Family Involvement

The students mentioned the impact family had on their academic achievement, and their comments give insight to ideas and strategies to helping them reach academic growth. This portion of the interview was most informative, because it provided evidence of the importance parental involvement has on the academic achievement of elementary African American males. Based upon the students' comments, three overarching themes emerged: (a) pre-literacy activities, (b) academic assistance, and (c) parental involvement.

Pre-Literacy Activities. Family and church involvement influence African American children's pre-literacy activities before entrance into public school. These students described reading time at home before they learned to read. Twelve students remembered family members reading to them before they started public school. One student captured his memories:

> I remember when I was about five, I was looking in this book, and my grandmother would come and sit by me and show me how to draw spiders and stuff.

Three students remembered their mother reading *Bible* stories at bedtime, while two students remembered both mother and father reading to them before they learned to read. Most students agreed that these activities helped them when they entered school. Some students recalled specific stories and could still remember enough to describe the characters and important events. Several students smiled as they told of stories and wonderful reading moments they shared with their family before they learned to read. Although, some students had difficulty remembering stories read to them, they all expressed the excitement they felt having adults read to them before they learned to read. However, four students could not voice this experience because they said they had no one to read to them.

The majority of the students pointed out that having someone read to them early helped them learn to read and recognize words which promoted their academic success. The responses from students indicated that pre-literacy activities were essential to their academic success as early as pre-school. These responses were coherent with the findings of Hale-Benson's (1982) study on the learning styles of African American children. Hale-Benson noted most African American children experienced pre-literacy activities before starting public school. Most of the

students indicated that their pre-literacy activity was a leading factor to them learning to read and achieving academic success.

Academic Assistance. Students discussed their approach to homework and the academic assistance received while doing homework. All students had a scheduled time designated to do homework. Students agreed that the most appropriate time to do homework was immediately after arriving home from school. However, some students were assigned household duties that needed attending before beginning homework. Some students reported watching television and feeding their pets as a means of relaxing before doing their homework.

All students stated that on an average, they do their homework everyday. Although doing homework is very important for academic growth, it was just as important to have someone check it before they turned it in to teachers. Students were asked who checked their homework, how often homework was checked and what parents/guardians looked for when checking homework. Nine students stated that their mothers checked their homework daily. One student said that his mother checked his homework almost everyday. Three students replied that their mother only checked homework on the days she was off from work. No assistance with homework was available evenings mother had to work.

These students implied that when their homework was checked and they received assistance in completing it, they did better in school and made better grades. One said that on the days after he received help with his homework, he felt better about his lessons and he was better able to answer the questions from his teacher the next day. Another mentioned that his mother only started checking his work regularly after being told by his teacher that he was not completing homework assignments. He implied a certain form of relief when he told of his mother helping him with his homework

Three others mentioned that both mother and grandmother checked homework. They expressed a pride in reporting this assistance, especially when mentioning their grandmothers. The students said that their grandmothers helped them everyday with their homework assignments and further implied the uniqueness of the extended family. These students stated that the collaboration between the mothers and grandmothers with homework and other school assignments helped them to be better students in school. One student said that his grandmother helped him with the parts of his homework that she understood and his mother assisted with the more difficult assignments. Two students said that both parents checked and assisted them with homework. On the other hand, two students mentioned that no one checked their homework or assisted them in any way. This student remarked dejectedly that no one assisted him with his homework that he had to check it himself.

Students were asked what their parents looked for when checking homework. Seven students stated that parents checked to see if they completed all homework assignments by checking homework folders and to make sure that homework was done correctly. One student said that both his mother and grandmother checked for different things in his homework. He mentioned that his mother checked his homework for correctness; however, his grandmother checked his handwriting skills to make sure that his writing was readable. He said that she does not accept illegible handwriting and sometimes he has to rewrite his assignments. Another said

that his mother sat next to him while he does his homework, so she knew that he did it. He stated that she checked to make sure that his homework was done correctly. Six students said that their parents only checked to see if the homework was correct without checking to see if all homework assignments had been completed.

However, one student mentioned that he checked over his own work and had to wait until the next day at school to find out if it was done correctly. He expressed how stressful it was not knowing if his work was done correctly and having to wait to find out the next day. All parents/guardians who checked homework assignments pointed out items that were not correct and had students either redo or correct it. They reported that their homework was double checked to make sure that it was correct. These students said that when they got to school the next day, they felt confident they knew their lesson because they had received extra help the night before from their parents or other family members.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the impact parents had on these students' academic success, students were asked how their parents helped them to learn. Five students stated that their parents helped them learn by reading with them and providing books or reading programs that helped improve their reading. The students insinuated that when parents provided reading material at home helped them to learn and make better grades in school. Some students who experienced learning problems were helped when parents made available reading programs and computer assistance through the Internet at home. Another student said that when he is not doing anything that his parent helped him to learn by making him read a book instead of allowing him to go outside or play video games. However, he stated that he would rather go outside, but this helped him to learn new things while he was at home. While four students believed that parents studying with them helped them to learn felt that when parents read and studied with them helped them learn and prepared them for the lessons they had to do at school.

Parents helping with math and science assignments helped two students learn and become better students at school. They stated that this assistance from their parents made these subjects fun and exciting and helped them make better grades on test and on their projects. Three students pointed out other factors that helped them to learn, such as, mothers talking with them about unacceptable grades and giving encouragement to do better. One said that when he made failings grades his mother spent additional time on weekends assisting him with the subjects that he needed help in.

> She tells me like when I bring my report card home that I can do better that if I bring another bad grade home I will have to stay in. Like on weekends she helps me with my multiplications and stuff.

Another student stated that him parents talked with him and encouraged him to get an education. The other student said that cooking with his mother and grandmother helped to improve his learning in reading and math.

> It might sound weird but cook. When I help cook, I get to measure, I get to count, and a lot of other stuff. When I am cooking they [mother and grandmother] give me a cookbook, and I get to read and see what I want. After I finish reading, I try to think

about how much it will probably cost. Sometimes, it be right and sometimes it be wrong. When I get to the store, I multiply how much it will take to get what I want.

Academic assistance from parents was an important factor related to academic success for these African American males. The majority of these students indicated a direct connection between receiving help with their homework and other class assignments and academic success. They felt that when their parents helped with homework or showed an interest in what they were doing at school, they made better grades, actually performed better and felt better prepared in class. The implications from these students concerning the impact parental support had on academic success are consistent with the findings of Trusty (1997) who found that parental involvement was significantly related to students' internal drive to achieve academically. Receiving input from parents gave these students confidence and helped to relieve the stress of not knowing if homework or assignments were correct. Students reported that waiting until the next day to check homework added stress and caused them to not do as well in school. Trusty (1997) also found that lack of parental involvement was related to low motivation and academic achievement.

Parental Involvement. Parental involvement plays a significant role toward the academic success of students. When parents were involved in these children's education, they tended to achieve better in school. Students discussed the times their parents visited the school and the reasons for the visits. Seven students stated that their parents visited the school to eat with them and visited the classroom on several occasions throughout the school year. One student when describing his mother's visits said that he felt happy when she visited his school.

Another student made a similar statement. He recalled a time his mother visited the school on a day the class was engaged in class projects and she helped him and some other students. He said that this really made him feel happy and proud. Several students mentioned that their parents attended field trips and other school related activities. Three said that the only time their parents' visited the school was when they were in trouble or when they had failing grades. Four other students said that the only time their parents visited the school was during parent-teacher conferences or when the teacher asked parents to come. Remarkably, one mentioned that his parents had not visited the school since he was in kindergarten. On the other hand, these students all expressed a need for their parents to visit their school and to be a part of their school life. All of them stated they would feel happy, excited, safe and secure if their parents would chose to visit them at school. One student's expression captured the essence of how students feel when their parents visited the school.

It makes me feel proud, like I know someone is here to help me and explain it[school work]. It makes me feel funny inside. I am proud and excited that they are here.

Students were asked how they felt parents could help them make better grades. Although, students' statements were worded differently, thirteen inferred that their parents could help them make better grades by studying with them. Two students said that parents could help them study for a test and check for incorrect answers, while another mentioned that their parents could help him to make better grades by helping him to stay ahead of his class.

Four students recommended helping with homework and studying with them as a way for parents to help them make better grades. They felt that when parents studied with them and helped with homework they make better grades and enjoyed school more. Students also felt that parents reading with them helped them perform better academically. Once again, students felt the importance of having their work checked by their parents and receiving input. These African American males felt that their parents could help them make better grades by helping them when they did not understand assignments and seeking assistance from outside sources when they were unable to help.

They felt that parental involvement was a significant factor that promoted their academic success. They reported when their parents showed an interested in their education this gave them a sense of security and helped to motivate them to seek academic success. The responses from students support the finding of Smith-Maddox's (1999) study that found that the greater the parental involvement in school-related activities the higher students aspired to learn. The study further found that parental involvement positively influenced the academic achievement of African American children, especially males. Therefore, these students' responses indicated that when their parents were involved in school-related activities it promoted academic success and improved their attitudes about school.

Life at School

These students provided rich information on life at school. They openly talked about issues they were faced with daily. They revealed things about school they enjoyed and told of things that inhibited them from learning. Although, it has always been noted that African American males had difficulty expressing their feelings, these elementary African American males spoke freely on concerns that until now were kept suppressed. They appeared ecstatic and eager to talk about school and all students left with a feeling that someone cared enough to ask how they felt. Based on responses, two over-arching themes emerged: safety at school and problems at school.

School Safety. School safety has become a concern for students and parents within the past few years. Students discussed safety issues at school and told of their fears as they related to safety at school. The majority of students felt somewhat safe at school but many had legitimate fears they felt needed addressing. Several students expressed they felt unsafe at school because they felt teachers had not made provisions for students in case of natural disasters. Although, students stated that the school had standard safety drills, they still felt unsure of what they needed to do in case of an actual disaster or crisis.

One student, who felt to some extent safe at school, mentioned that trusting the adults was not a problem, but he had fears of being hurt by other students. Another stated he was assured that people were watching out for his safety and would keep him informed if the school was in danger or in a crisis. Sadly, one student mentioned that he felt unsafe at home and school because of the possibilities of burglaries or other acts of violence that could occur at both locations. He mentioned the fear of a crisis happening was constantly present in his mind almost daily. Although, he stated that he had never been involved in a dangerous situation at home or school, the fear still worried him most of the time.

Another said that he felt safer at school than at home because at school he was free of profanity and heavy cigarette smoke. The safety he felt at school helped him to concentrate on his class work, but at home he was unfocused and unable to do his work. These students felt safe at school with the exception of a few who mentioned the fears that were present in their minds on a regular basis. The school does have in place crisis prevention and safety plans in case of a crisis or disaster at the school. The responses on school safety were found to have influenced both academic success and failure in these students. A majority indicated that they performed better academically when safety issues were not a concern. They pointed out that when school was viewed as a safe haven, they focused on academics and less on safety issues. On the other hand, students who were concerned about safety at school indicated they spent more time worried about safety and less on academics.

Problems at School. Students experience all kind of problems at school and it is important that they have someone whom they feel comfortable talking with when they are faced with obstacles. Students confided frankly about problems they faced at school and gave ways in which they attempted to solve them.

Two students mentioned academics as problems they had at school. One student mentioned schoolwork as a problem and another student said that he had a problem in math and reading. However, they said that they received extra help from teachers and parents. Remarkably, four students stated that they had no problems at school. When students were free of the daily stressors they stood a better chance of being academically successful because they could focus their attention on academics and not on the problems at school.

Students deliberated on what they thought were the biggest problems children their ages had at school. The responses went from academics to friends. One student said that he felt the biggest problem for children in school was teachers assigning too much work. He felt that teachers gave too much work and he stated that several of his friends mentioned leaving school when they turned sixteen. Three students had similar responses to school work being the biggest problems for students at school. One felt that not understanding class assignments was a big problem for students at school, because without an understanding, they were unable to complete assignments, which usually resulted in a bad grade. Another replied that one of the biggest problems students faced at school was staying focused, listening to the teachers and copying the information correctly off the board.

Problems at school based on student's responses were related to academic success and failure. All students specified emotional responses to problems they faced at school and depending on the severity of the problem, caused students to withdraw and disassociate themselves from academics and teachers, which resulted in academic failure. Students' responses pointed out that problems gone unsolved caused them to dislike school and not perform as well academically. The responses also indicated that having someone to confide and intervene promoted academic success, because these students were better able to focus on academics and less on the problems. Responses from students indicated that problems at school inhibited their academic success.

Academics

During this interview students shared how they learned and the study strategies that worked best for them. Students talked about reading and the fundamentals needed to be successful in school. All students expressed a fear of academic failure in their pursuit of an education. The students further stated that study skills promoted their academic success.

Study Skills. Teaching students study skills is essential to their academic achievement. Students need to be instructed on how and what to study. Often times, it was not students' comprehension, but that they did not know how to study the materials taught. These students spoke on how they studied for a test. Seven said they preferred to first study the words and have someone to call them out. One student said that he broke his spelling words down by looking for smaller words within the spelling word and he learned the words better by writing them down.

Five students mentioned similar study skills that involved the family that helped when they studied for a spelling test. Most students said they preferred to have someone call the spelling words out and check for corrections. Two others said that they write the spelling words down and say them several times. No one called the words out to these students. They preferred to study without assistance, however both had a unique method of learning by writing the words several times until they were sure they had learned them.

Two mentioned that studying with two or more students helped prepared them for a spelling test. Students reported again how group work helped them learn better. They stated they learned better when they had someone to help them with their spelling words. Three students said they used a different method to learn their spelling words, they repeated the words several times and then wrote them and had others call out the words and check for correctness. Both groups of students felt that their method helped them to be successful in passing their spelling test.

Students were asked what they felt could help them make better grades, and the majority of their responses were to study and listen more. One student said that he would double-check his work to make sure that it was correct before turning it in. Another student said that he would reframe from playing when he had schoolwork that he needed to complete. He felt that putting his schoolwork as priority would help him make better grades. The other students gave similar responses in that they would study, listen more, try harder and follow directions in order to make better grades. All felt that studying was indeed the key to them achieving academic success.

They indicated study skills as an important factor related to academic success. Students pointed out that well developed organized study skills promoted academic success. However, they indicated from their responses that study skills without consistent study habits inhibited their academic success. Several students indicated group studying helped to promote academic success. Responses indicated that maternal support was related to academic success in these African American students. Their responses supported the finding from Gonzales' et al. (1996)

study on the influence maternal support had on the academic achievement of African American males and found that maternal support predicted academic success.

Academic Achievement. The academic achievement of students has been the focus of all educators and administrators throughout the United States for decades. All individuals who are charged with the responsibility of educating children are faced, at some point, with what influences the academic achievement of students. Students elaborated on why they felt some students did better in school than others and most clarified their responses. Two students felt that most students did well in school because they fully understood what the subjects were about. They felt that when students did not understand what the teachers were explaining and they did not understand what the subject was about they did not do as well as the students who understood and were not afraid to ask for assistance.

Six students felt that students who achieved academically listened more to their teachers during classroom instructions. One said that he felt students who were playing or doing other things while the teacher talked did not do as well as students who listened. Four students felt that students who studied more and received assistance from home did better in school than the students who never studied or who studied a little. One said that when students' parents helped them and expected them to do well, this prepared students to do better in school. Another mentioned that students who checked their work before turning it in to teachers did better in school than students who rushed to get finished with their work.

Students were asked to discuss what helped them to learn in the classroom. Five students felt that their study habits helped them to learn in the classroom. One student said that studying at home helped him learn in the classroom, while another reported that when his teacher studied with him helped him to learn. Another student mentioned when the teacher took the class outside for nature walks helped him with both math and science. He said that he was able to count and observe nature in one visit. One student said that when his teacher allowed him to study with other students in the class, this helped him to learn better.

Obtaining academic success was an important goal of these African American students. The responses indicated that teaching styles and learning styles were important factors related to their academic success. They indicated teachers' attitude about learning and their devotion and dedication to helping students learn promoted academic success. Responses also indicated that lack of understanding of the subjects being taught and study skills inhibited academic success in these students.

Classroom Distractions. Teachers and students alike everyday are faced with classroom distractions that ultimately interfere with learning. Students are often sent to the office for disrupting class, but little is ever mentioned about the students left behind in the classroom and the effect these distractions had on their learning. Students were asked to describe how they felt when other students disrupted their learning and whether it hindered them from accomplishing the objectives they are working on at the time of the interference. The majority of student stated they were affected when students disrupted the class. Nine students said that when students

disrupted the class this caused them to lose their concentration, they had to start over and sometimes would forget what the teacher was saying.

One mentioned that when the class was reading and the teacher had to stop to handle a discipline problem, this caused him to have to go back and reread the paragraph because he had forgotten the place where he was reading and he had missed several words. Another said that when students made noises in the classroom and he looked up to see what the students were doing would lose his place and had to start over again. He said that sometimes he even lost interest in want he was doing. Still another student stated that he just sat there, watched and wondered why the students were disrupting the class and then when he started back to his lesson he would have forgotten the directions on how to do the work.

Another said that when students disrupted the class, he would sort of lose his place but he would find it back and kept on working. One student said that he would just sit, placed his head on his desk and listened to the students' disruptions. Sometimes, he said that he would put his books down and do something else until the disturbance was over. Another mentioned that he really did nothing, because when students disrupted the class, he said that he could not think and he became confused and wondered why someone would not want to learn.

Most of the students expressed the emotional states they were in during the time students were disrupting the class. The majority of these students said that they become angry and frustrated with the students who disrupted the class. One student said that he got mad when students did not allow the teacher the opportunity to finish teaching. Two others voiced the same sentiments of anger because the disruptions made them lose their places and caused them to not be able to complete their class work. Another student said that he felt disappointed in the students who disrupted the class, because he said they interred with his learning.

Classroom distractions were a definite factor related to the academic success of these students. The majority of students indicated emotional responses to either academic success or failure concerning classroom distractions. The responses indicated that these students felt that classroom distractions inhibited academic success for students. In fact, all students indicated that their academic success was in some way affected by classroom distractions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to expand the knowledge base on elementary African American males in grades three through six and to gain an insight into their educational experiences. This study denoted the actual passage through the short-lived lives of sixteen elementary African American males who shared their viewpoints on academic success and failure among their group. The review of literature found numerous factors thought to lead to academic achievement among African American males; however, none was found that provided first-hand accounts on what they needed to be academically successful. The strength of these students was unique because when they were faced with obstacles either at home or school they persevered. It was almost as if they developed or invented their own coping mechanism. Teachers were sometimes not even aware of the problems their encounter daily. The conclusions

from this study are drawn from a purposeful sample of elementary African American males that represents one elementary rural school in Mississippi. It is from their viewpoints that this interpretation is based.

The African American males involved in this study possessed a quality that was captivating and inspiring. They did not appear intimidated by the many questions and discussions they were asked to respond to. Educators and administrators are indebted to the students in this study and others like them, for the honesty in responses that can lead to modification in curriculum and traditional teaching practices. Several themes emerged from the resulting data of the study and will be discussed in the following conclusion. The emerging themes were: (a) pre-literacy activities, (b) academic assistance, (c) parental involvement, (d) safety at school, (e) problems at school, (f) study skills, (g) academic achievement, and (h) classroom distractions.

Conclusions

The intellectual power of these students made it difficult to imagine that among them were students who had repeated grades and were in danger of retention. Many of these students had outside issues that prevented them from achieving to their fullest potentials, however, most refused to succumb to the threats of failure. Several of these students came from environments that placed education attainment at the bottom of their priorities and they were faced daily with trying to accommodate the expectations from home and school. These African American males are indeed the catalyst to helping administrators in their quest of leaving no child behind. The data from this study offer eight emergent themes regarding factors that promote and inhibit academic achievement as revealed by sixteen elementary African American males in a rural Mississippi school.

Pre-Literacy Activities

The early learning experiences of these African American males varied, but the majority indicated that they had family or church members who exposed them to reading during their pre-school years. Many attended Sunday school before they were able to recognize the alphabets and were taught how to recite poems and speeches for programs at church. They recalled parents reading stories before they could read and they reported this helped when they started kindergarten. The majority of students who reported pre-literacy activities had higher reading scores than the ones who reported not being read to. Pre-literacy activities promoted academic success in these students and inhibited academic success in the students who did not experience pre-literacy activities.

Academic Assistance

The role of the adult in the education of these African American males was indicated as extremely important to their academic success. Having the input from adults with homework and projects helped them to achieve better and appreciate what getting an education was all about. The students all indicated how vital it was to their educational careers to have someone take an interest in what they were doing at school. They indicated that when someone showed an interest in their schoolwork they made better grades, they did their homework and they listened more in class. Academic assistance promoted academic success in these students and a

lack of inhibited academic success. Students who reported receiving little or no assistance did not do as well in school as the students who did.

Parental Involvement

Parents visiting school and spending quality time promoted academic success for these students. Many recalled proudly the times their parents visited them at school. They reported the excitement they felt seeing their teachers and parents working together for their academic success. Many said that the only time their parents visited the school was when they were in trouble. Sometimes, negative attention was better than none at all. The majority of students who indicated that their parents visited their school regularly to check on or have lunch with them had fewer behavior referrals than the ones who parents did not visit the school. These students also had better test scores and made better grades than the students who parents did not visit the school. Additionally, students who had not repeated a grade, parents were more active in their education than the ones who had repeated a grade.

School Safety

Safety at school was an issue for the majority of these students. The inward fears they held occupied many of their minds daily. Several felt that their school was not exempt from the tragedies that occurred at other schools throughout our nation. The fear of injuries consumed their minds both at home and school, however many felt safer at school than at home. The safety drills that were required at this school seemed to have reiterated the possibility that something could happen one day. They indicated that school safety was related to academic success and failure. Students indicated that on the days they were more fearful of something happening at school they did not perform as well academically.

Problems at School

These students indicated that the problems they encountered daily could sometimes be overwhelming and took away from the enjoyment of going to school. When they were faced with problems, the way they choose to handle the problem usually determined the outcome and had an effect on their academic success. The students who had developed a support system that consisted of peers and adults avoided additional problems because they allowed others to help in solving the problem. However, several that reported not having a support system attempted to solve the problems on their own, which led to additional problems at school. These students indicated that problems not handled sometimes led to discipline referrals and inhibited academic success. Students also indicated that when problems were detected and handled early promoted academic success.

Study Skills

When teachers assigned students materials to study and the students did not know how to study inhibited the academic success of these students. All of the students indicated that they had developed their own unique methods for studying and some proved successful for them. Through their methods of studying, many were able to successfully master objectives in the classroom. On the contrary, based on responses and test results, several needed to be taught effective study skills and habits. Well-developed study skills and consistency in studying

promoted the academic success of many of these African American males. The students indicated that having someone to study with, preferably their mothers, they performed better on tests and made better grades.

Academic Achievement

These students had a good concept of the meaning of academic achievement and fully appreciated its rewards. They were aware of the things that promoted academic achievement in the classroom, however, many for various reasons selected not to adhere. These African American males indicated that studying at home and school, listening to teachers during instructional time and being taught the way they preferred to learn promoted academic success for them. They directly linked learning styles to academic achievement. Responses indicated that receiving an understanding of the subject objectives from their teachers promoted academic success in the majority of these students. The majority of these students indicated by their reading time at school and home that literacy was understood as a necessity for present and future survival. Reading for these students was a fascinating and adventurous way of traveling to places they could only dream of. These visionary readers, who were the majority, scored higher on reading test than those students who indicated that reading was boring and who did not like to read. The students who indicated they read at home also scored higher on reading comprehension test than those who reported not reading at home. It should be pointed out that parents have the responsibility of providing reading resources for their children at home to teach their children to appreciate reading. Most of these young students, who took advantage of reading as a tool to learning, articulated and responded to questions in a more affluent manner.

Several of these African American students had difficulties with reading comprehension, but they indicated that when given something to read that interested them, they tended to comprehend better. Their responses indicated that reading and reading comprehension was related to both academic success and failure. Based on grades and reading test scores, the students who read with comprehension was more academically success than the ones who did not read with comprehension. Literacy activities at home and school influenced academic success and failure of these students.

Classroom Distractions

The agony these African American males felt when other students interrupted their learning was an indication of their commitment to education. These students reported feelings of anger, disappointment and dismay when students' behavior in the classroom caused them to lose focus. The majority of these students' responses indicated that classroom distractions inhibited their academic success. All students indicated that their academic success was affected by classroom distractions.

Recommendations

1. Community awareness and parenting skills programs through the public schools to offer parents parenting lessons on the educational advantages of pre-literacy activities. The schools could partner with local churches and businesses to make the classes more accessible to parents.

2. Involve stakeholders through adopt-a-child programs and have them assist students who may not have academic assistance at home with resources to help them achieve academic growth.
3. Design parent friendly programs that encourage parental participation, such as incentives and award system.
4. Develop school-wide programs that focus on school safety and have emergency telephone numbers visible for students and a security system or on-duty officer.
5. School administrators must provide an outlet for students when they are faced with problems at school. Organize peer mediation programs, student unions and other programs that provide students the opportunity of voicing their concerns and fears.
6. Design programs that teach both parents and students how to study, using the most effective and appropriate approaches for individual students.
7. Schools are charged with developing strategies that compensate for areas that are lacking in the homes, therefore, developing programs that encourages active reading is essential to this population of students. Programs such as, book clubs, frequent library visits and assessing students' reading interest to match reading materials to promote growth.
8. School policies that address frequent classroom distractions and placing the responsibility on parents and students.

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